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FOR DAS DON YAMAMOTO

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ET](#)  
SUBJECT: MELES ON DETAINEES AND WAY AHEAD

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES VICKI HUDDLESTON. REASON: 1.4(D)

¶1. (C) Summary. Charge met with Prime Minister Meles August 14 to discuss her visit with CUD detainees Dr. Yacob Haile-Mariam, Biruk Kebede, Birtukan Mideksa and Muluneh Eyoel. Pastor Daniel Gebresalasie and Charge spoke for two hours with Yacob who said that he had drafted a letter that he would give to us when the executive committee of the CUD signed, specifically, mentioning Hailu Shawel and Berhanu Nega. Yacob said that the point of the letter was to reaffirm the CUD's rejection of violent action; its acceptance of the constitution unconditionally; and its readiness to cooperate with the EPRDF. In sum, he and others were ready for dialogue and concerned about the problems facing the country. Biruk, another key CUD member, reflected Yacob's view. Birtukan and Muluneh were younger and feistier. Charge also showed Meles the article on the web that claimed that she had met with the prisoners and asked for reconciliation. According to the piece the prisoners had refused the government's offer because it was not unconditional. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Meles acknowledged that Yacob and Biruk seemed to have had a change in attitude. But they also should admit that they were wrong. According to Meles it might be ok to be outrageous if you cross the line - assuming that the courts agree -- but you can't get off free if you don't admit your mistake. Meles said that he is looking for the detainees to say, "we were wrong, we regret it, and we will not do it again." Charge explained that the judicial process had thus far not convinced the embassy nor the international community that the defendants were guilty. There was nothing in the video portion, some possible evidence against one individual in the audio portion, and unless there was evidence in the 900 pages of written testimony the prosecution had not made its case. Meles countered that there is evidence in the 900 pages as well as in the video and the audio. Some of the evidence he said was in English. For example, when Hailu Shawel called for the change in institutions such as the National Electoral Board, the courts, he was calling for the overthrow of the constitution. I pointed out that it was not clear that Hailu's words could be considered illegal. Meles said that it was clear that he intended to use violence.

¶3. (C) Charge also suggested to Meles he consider Yacob's formula of suspending the sentence if the defendants were found guilty and returning them to jail if they violated the law. Meles turned that down saying that the courts decide on the sentence. He had never heard of a suspended sentence. I then ask if he would review the conditions of the two detainees in solitary confinement because according to Muluneh it was completely dark in the solitary cell. Rather like the conditions of the count of Monte Cristo suffered, Charge said. Meles replied that the jails in Addis Ababa are not like the Count's; but he would check. He implied that we all believe too many stories from the detainees.

¶4. (C) Charge then asked Meles to meet with UEDF/OFDM leaders Beyene Petros, Bulcha Demeksa, and Merera Gudina because problems had arisen in the joint EPRDF/UEDF/OFDM visit to Ambo. Meles said he would consider my request, but that he was increasingly concerned that Merera was allowing the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) to use and expand the Oromo National Congress (ONC) constituency. Charge said all the better reason to meet with Merera and warn him of his concerns. Meles said that he will meet with CUDP leaders Temesgen and Ayele as well as with Lidetu Ayalew of the UEDP-Medhin. Although he disagrees with their philosophy -- in fact his political position is closer to Merera's -- they had now proven that they were prepared to respect the rule of law.

¶5. (C) Comment: No more can be done on the detainee issue for the moment. Hopefully in the fall, Pastor Daniel and Charge will be able to continue our conversation with Yacob and others. It was unfortunate that despite Charge's agreement with Yacob, only a few days later a misconstrued version of our meeting was on the internet. This demonstrates that some of the CUD detained leaders are not interested in dialogue, perhaps hoping that if they are found guilty the government will be forced by domestic and/or international events to pardon them. This is quite unlikely because Meles believes that the worst that can happen is for the domestic public perception to be that it doesn't matter what is done outside the law. Meles feels strongly -- despite what seems to us as lack of evidence -- that they are guilty. We are not aware of whether Merera is fronting for the ONC, but if the government becomes convinced that this is the case, there is trouble ahead for him. End Comment.  
HUDDLESTON